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The plea the system ignored

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When he was 3, she wrote letters for his scrapbook about his blue eyes, his fondness for peanut butter and the happiness he'd brought to her life. But when he was 4, she began to suspect that his sullenness was a sign of deeper troubles. And by the time he was 16, she was crying out for help from a mental health system that was reluctant to treat someone who refused treatment.

This summer, Joyce Blevins' hopes and fears became reality. Her son, Glenn Blevins, will begin to receive the mental treatment he needs. But it comes only after he allegedly beat another man into unconsciousness. If similar tragedies are to be avoided in the future, his mother says, laws need to change to make it easier for families to get involuntary treatment for mentally ill adults.

Glenn Blevins was found mentally incompetent to stand trial this month in connection with an attack on a day laborer on Fort Ord. Psychiatrist Taylor Fithian concluded paranoid schizophrenia had left the 27-year-old unable to understand the court proceedings and help with his own defense.

He will be placed in a state institution where he will receive therapy, education about the judicial system and, if needed and approved by the court, involuntary medication until he regains competency. If that does not come within the next three years, he could be placed in a long-term conservatorship.

Joyce Blevins said she is sad for her son and his victim, but relieved the system will finally do what she's been asking for more than a decade.

Local law enforcement and county mental health workers have long known of her son's violent tendencies, she said. They've arrested and hospitalized him on numerous occasions, the last time in November. He was always released within a few days because he refused treatment and was not judged a danger to himself or others.

In the last year, she said, her son's symptoms have become more acute. He hears voices and believes the government is attacking him with lasers. Thirty-six hours before the assault, she said, she attended a support group with county mental health workers where she expressed anger at not being able to have him committed.

"If you have cancer, you're able to weigh what you want to do with your body," Blevins said, "whereas Glenn doesn't have the capacity to reason, 'If I don't take these medications, this is the way I'll be.'"

Community treatment

Monterey County officials who deal with psychiatric commitment and conservatorship, however, said the government must walk a fine line between protecting society and violating the civil rights of a person who refuses treatment. In an era of "deinstitutionalization," the emphasis is on treating the mentally ill in the community.

There are more than 4,000 mentally ill people living successfully in the community in Monterey County, said Wayne Clark, director of the county's behavioral health division.

About half of the 2,000 to 3,000 individuals who make up the county's homeless population are mentally ill, he said, and many of those have made a choice to be there. Unless they are deemed "gravely disabled" or a danger to themselves or others, the county is legally obliged to respect that decision.

"People have the right to refuse medications," said Robert Jackson, who oversees much of Natividad Medical Center's mental health unit for the county. "It's a big deal. It's removing peoples' basic freedoms and liberties."

Laws allow the state to involuntarily medicate a person on an emergency basis during hospitalization, he said, but that ability is temporary unless the person is placed in conservatorship or is found incompetent to face criminal prosecution. Even then, the court must order it. The goal, said Clark, is to get people into treatment long enough so they recognize their improvement on medication and take it voluntarily.

Ron Honberg, legal director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, known as NAMI, said his organization supports implementation of Laura's Law, a 2002 state statute named after a 19-year-old Nevada City woman who was shot and killed at the public clinic where she was working by a mental patient who resisted his family's attempt to seek treatment.

The law provides a mechanism for involuntary outpatient treatment, but it must be funded and implemented by individual counties. To date, only Los Angeles and Nevada counties have done so.

"We can look back 30 to 40 years, when people didn't have rights and they were being hospitalized commonly without due process or hearings. Legal reforms took place for laudable reasons," said Honberg. "But a legitimate question can be asked of whether they went too far."

Dr. **Xavier Amador**, a former NAMI director and the author of the book "I Am Not Sick, I Don't Need Help: How to Help Someone with Mental Illness Accept Treatment," said a person's denial of mental illness is a symptom of the illness itself.

"Forcibly treating people against their will is a vital tool we must have," said Amador, whose brother was schizophrenic. "One in 10 (schizophrenics) die from this illness," through suicide.

Glenn Blevins' case illustrates what can happen when a mentally ill violent offender continues to refuse treatment. The process he is now undergoing is indicative of one of the avenues available that introduces the mentally ill to involuntary treatment

and, though rare, long-term conservatorship.

Disturbing symptoms

Joyce Blevins said she saw danger signs when her son was 4 years old. He bullied his friends and was never happy. When he was 5, he exhibited no concern for consequences.

At 8, she took him to a psychologist for the first time after he told her he wanted to stick a knife through his heart.

His inner demons first surfaced in his drawings when he was 11. He wrote a teacher's name next to a bloody dagger. He was so obsessed with weapons, his mother locked the kitchen knives in the garage.

A school resource specialist wrote that she was "extremely concerned about Glenn's behavior and self-concept." The majority of his fifth-grade assignments, whether written, drawn or in class discussions, included death, blood and violence.

"No matter what the assigned creative writing topic, Glenn would manage to incorporate mass murder, brutal violence and usually his own death," she wrote at the time. "On one occasion, Glenn described to the class his attempted suicide by hanging himself in his closet."

One of his drawings from the period shows him being gunned down while yelling, "Kill me please." More detailed drawings would come later, including one that depicts him shooting himself and being cast into hell by a demon.

A psychological assessment determined he was "seriously emotionally disturbed" and warned of "possible emergence of a more distinct major mental disorder in the future."

He was transferred from Forest Grove Middle School in Pacific Grove to a "therapeutic school" at Gambetta Middle School in Castroville. Doctors first tried antidepressants and later, after diagnosing him as bipolar, lithium.

Neither worked well, Joyce Blevins said, because he had been misdiagnosed. At the time, she said, doctors did not believe schizophrenia could present itself in young children, a school of thought that is now changing.

Her son eventually made his way to Pacific Grove High School, where he was kicked out for threatening a teacher and the principal. He did not graduate, though he later earned his equivalency degree.

Police involvement

By that time, local police were well aware of Glenn Blevins. He was arrested at gunpoint and involuntarily hospitalized at Natividad when he was 16 after he told his mother he would kill police, his teachers and himself. The hospital released him after a few hours, against her wishes, to the father of one of his friends, she said.

Eventually, her son chose to live on the streets. His life was a vicious cycle of drug abuse, assaultive behavior, jail, hospitals and release, she said. Eventually, his violence made her fear for her life, so she drew the blinds and refused to open her door to him.

She also suspects her son's mental illness is complicated by brain injury. She said he's suffered numerous concussions at the hands of people trying to defend themselves against his attacks.

In November, he was hospitalized again after he destroyed her Christmas tree. She asked doctors there to do an MRI or CAT scan to evaluate any brain damage. She also sent a list of his symptoms, including auditory hallucinations and his belief that the FBI was recording him.

Glenn refused treatment and the hospital released him in a few days without the brain scans, she said.

In January, he broke down her door and caused thousands of dollars in damage. She reported it to police, but they never found her son. Her follow-up calls to law enforcement and Glenn's case worker, she said, were not returned.

Glenn came to her house again on Aug. 10, the morning of the assault on Artemio Santiago Garcia, she said. He took her face in his hand, shook her and threatened her before leaving. Hours later, Santiago Garcia, a day laborer Glenn allegedly picked up in Seaside, was left unconscious on Fort Ord.

Blevins said she was chagrined at initial calls for her son to be charged with a hate crime. She kept quiet and hoped the judicial system would reach the right conclusion. The attack, she said, had nothing to do with Santiago Garcia's ethnicity.

"It's his mental illness," she said of her son. "I think every week Glenn has been hurting someone. Glenn that morning, I think, would have hurt anyone."

Sought understanding

In a prepared statement, Joyce Blevins wrote to Santiago Garcia. "My prayers and concern have been with you. I hope you can find forgiveness for the pain inflicted upon you."

She also asked for understanding for the fear that her son and others with mental illness experience.

"Just for a moment, imagine what it is like to be Glenn," she wrote. "He is awakened multiple times. He thinks people are after him. He fears 'they' will harm him. At 1:30 a.m. he phones his mom, 'There are about 50 of them here. They have lasers aimed at my eyes (and) my heart. I just thought someone should know.'"

Blevins said she felt empathy for the parents of Cho Seng-hui, who shot 62 students at Virginia Tech, killing 33 of them and then himself.

"We just wait for the call," Blevins said of parents of the mentally ill. "I always worried (Glenn would) kill a lot of people and himself."

After the Virginia Tech shootings, she saw news channels run lists of symptoms people should look for in their peers who might be emotionally disturbed and whom they should notify. She e-mailed CNN newscaster Paula Zahn in frustration.

"I did notify (authorities)," she said. "They did nothing. I'm glad (mental health officials) have been there ... but wasn't there more they could do?"

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